

Displaying power, contesting authority. Preparatoria students in Guadalajara.

Anna Streissler
Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology,
University of Vienna
anna.streissler@univie.ac.at

EMIGRA Working Papers núm. 39
ISSN 2013-3804

Resumen/ Abstract

This paper deals with students' political culture in two preparatory schools in Guadalajara, Mexico where I carried out fieldwork in the year 2000. I focus on the precarious relationship between students and teachers and forms of contesting authority and displaying power that I observed among students in one school. In North American or Western European public schools as well as in public Mexican secondary schools the power relations between students and teachers and between the students and the administration are generally reported to be fixed, in the sense of the students being the weak party and the others powerful, despite attempts of resistance to this authoritarian structure by students (Willis 1975, 1981). Although this is seldom spelled out, this power difference is seen to result from a confluence of (assumed) differences in age, knowledge and structural positions in the school as organisation. As Eckert argued for high schools in the U.S.A., "ultimate power in the hierarchy resides with the staff, who control the basic resources—materials, space, time, freedom of movement, and sponsorship—necessary to produce all activities and to achieve visibility" (Eckert 1989: 111). Sketching the organisation of *preparatorias*, I will show that the staff have much less control over the resources in this type of school, thus being in a structurally weaker position from the outset. Partly due to the heterogeneous student body, students have considerable leeway in negotiating their individual interests as well as their interests as a group. During my fieldwork, students and teachers were engaged in a tug of war, in yielding and wielding power (Villarreal 1994) which was at times more salient than at others. I will illustrate this with two examples of students displaying power and contesting authority, one of leaving lessons, which concern the large majority of students, the second of the occupation of school as a contestation of authority made public, concerning only a handful of student activists. In both examples it became evident that students used multiple ways of displaying power and contesting authority different to forms of resistance in European or American schools. These displays of power formed a vital part of the "hidden curriculum" (Streissler 2005) and are best described by Foucault's notion of power, namely that it is ubiquitous, is produced and reproduced through constant social interaction, can be negotiated and contested. This cultural knowledge is vital for students' life in Mexican society at large.

Palabras clave / Keywords: student-teacher relations, power, "hidden curriculum"

Cómo citar este artículo: **STREISSLER, A. I.** (2007) "Displaying power, contesting authority. Preparatoria students in Guadalajara, Mexico." *EMIGRA Working Papers*, 39. Accesible en línea: www.emigra.org.es. Descarga realizada el (dd-mm-aaaa)

How to quote this paper: **STREISSLER, A. I.** (2007) "Displaying power, contesting authority. Preparatoria students in Guadalajara, Mexico." *EMIGRA Working Papers*, 39. Available on line: www.emigra.org.es. Last retrieved on (dd-mm-yyyy)

Este texto se presentó como comunicación al II Congreso Internacional de Etnografía y Educación: Migraciones y Ciudadanías. Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, 5-8 Septiembre 2008

Displaying power, contesting authority. *Preparatoria* students in Guadalajara, Mexico.¹

This paper deals with one aspect of school life in two preparatory schools in Guadalajara, Mexico where I carried out fieldwork in the year 2000 on students' political culture for my doctoral dissertation in social anthropology "Being young-becoming citizens. Everyday life and political culture in two preparatory schools in Guadalajara, Mexico" (2003). I focus on the precarious relationship between students and teachers and forms of contesting authority and displaying power that I observed among students in one school. After a short review of theoretical findings, I will first describe the Mexican school system and the peculiarities of the *preparatoria*, focussing especially on student-teacher relationships. Then I will analyse two examples of students displaying power and contesting authority, one of leaving lessons, which concern the large majority of students and are signs of independence vis-à-vis the teachers, the second of the occupation of school as a contestation of the administration's authority, concerning only a handful of student activists and having repercussions far beyond that particular school.

Schools as strongly hierarchical institutions

A common and long standing trend in studies on school and education in Europe and North America has been to characterise schools as highly authoritarian and hierarchical institutions which mediate the interests of (usually capitalist) nation-states (Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1990) in a rather simplistic top-down manner. Empirical studies on schools picked up with Paul Willis in Europe (Willis 1975, 1981) and Michael Apple, Lois Weis (Apple and Weis 1983) and Henry Giroux (Giroux 1983) in the US, focussing more strongly on resistance and students' agency (cf. Levinson and Holland 1996). In most descriptions of schools however, teachers and students were envisioned as producing and reproducing a system in which the power relations between the two groups were envisioned as static, the teachers (and the administration) being the powerful and the students the powerless. Although this was seldom spelled out, this power difference was seen to result from a confluence of (assumed) differences in age (adults vs. children or adolescents), knowledge (teachers as knowledgeable, students as lacking knowledge) and structural positions in the school as organisation. As Eckert argued for high schools in the U.S.A., "ultimate power in the hierarchy resides with the staff, who control the basic resources—materials, space, time, freedom of movement, and sponsorship—necessary to produce all activities and to achieve visibility" (Eckert 1989, 111). Furthermore, US high school compensates for its basic denial of autonomy to students by offering extracurricular programs (Eckert 1989, 100). I will argue below that most of these features do not apply to Mexican preparatory schools.

¹ I developed many of the ideas for this presentation first in a paper entitled "Contesting hierarchy with multiple strategies—*preparatoria* students in Guadalajara" presented at the Socrates Intensive Programme Agency, Discourses of Power and Collective Representations, Vienna, August 29th 2003. For comments on that paper I thank Thomas Fillitz (Vienna), Helena Wulff (Stockholm), Jean-Pierre Warnier (Paris), Gerd Baumann (Amsterdam) and Nigel Rapport (St. Andrews). For more recent discussions on power, I thank Ulrike Davis-Sulikowski (Vienna).

Preparatorias in the Mexican school system

Let me briefly characterise the Mexican school system. Theoretically at least, the Mexican school system is compulsory until the end of secondary school, when students are usually 15 years old. If they want to continue their education, to have better credentials for getting qualified jobs or consider attending university, they need to attend a *preparatoria*, corresponding roughly to high school. This school type is not compulsory and is administered not by the federal bureau of education but by a university, as its goal is to prepare students for academic studies at university. This is a three-year school with 6 forms, which change each semester, just as the set of subjects. Whereas a number of subjects are compulsory each semester, students in 5th and 6th form can also choose some subjects according to their prospective studies at the different university faculties.

Despite an expansion of the secondary education system in the last years, there are not enough preparatory schools in Mexico. One attempt to ameliorate the problem is to have two schools share one school building. There is a morning shift and an afternoon shift, with different teachers teaching and different students attending the two shifts. Only the headmaster or headmistress and two other high administrative officials are responsible for the school as such, administering both shifts.

Each university is in charge of several *preparatorias*. The two *preparatorias* where I carried out my fieldwork were administered by the public University of Guadalajara. After a reform in the 1990s, in which democratisation and decentralisation were promoted on all levels, the University of Guadalajara is nowadays mainly made up of University Centres, corresponding to faculties, and *preparatorias*. SEMS (*Secretaría de Educación Medio Superior*), the Office for Higher Education, administers all preparatory schools.

In order to attend a *preparatoria*, students have to pass an entrance exam but there are no official school fees in the preparatory schools administered by the public universities. (In the last decades, private universities and institutions of higher education have cropped up with their own preparatory schools where entrance exams are easy but fees are comparatively high.) Those students who have managed to get a place in a *preparatoria*, already identify with the university to a large degree and perceive themselves as (university) students rather than as pupils.

At the time, students are usually 16-18 years old but a significant majority are older, depending on the school's social intake. (In the two schools where I did my research, 20-25% of the students were between 19 and the mid 20ies). Approximately half of them are already working part-time, more boys than girls and the employment rates are higher in schools located in poorer neighborhoods. A very few students are already married and have their own children. All this creates a student body that is heterogeneous not only in age but also in life experience. Nevertheless, *preparatoria* plays an important role for the production and reproduction of youth culture in general and student culture in particular, part of which is related to student politics.

Approximately 10 per cent of the students are actively involved in student politics, forming different student candidate slates (*planillas*), some of which are affiliated with the biggest university student federation FEU (Federation of University Students). As an involvement in FEU may provide a springboard into university politics and thus an easier entrance into university as such, student politics on the level of

preparatory schools is already a serious matter and professionally organised, as I witnessed during the student elections. The candidate slate which wins the student elections within the school forms the Student Council.

Fieldwork

I conducted my fieldwork in two time lapses, one between April and June 2000, the second between September and December of that year. At first I carried out parallel research in two schools, taking advantage of the split of schools into a morning and an afternoon shift. I mainly used the method of participant observation (with the focus on observation) and as well as conducting additional ethnographic interviews. In September 2000 I returned to the second school on which I focused exclusively during the second part of my research. The data for this paper comes from this second school, where I was granted the status of a guest student by the headmistress and became part of a 5th form (with a focus on social sciences), fully participating in student life, ranging from participating in classes, working in teams on assignments to occasionally playing truant and participating in youth cultural activities inside and outside school. (The students soon explained my presence as a kind of social service, a role they themselves had to take on towards their community in order in return for free education received in *preparatoria*.) In this second phase I relied largely on participant observation (this time with a focus on participation) and conducted complementary interviews with students and staff at the end of the term. The general aim of my research was to grasp from the students' point of view which role *preparatoria* played in inculcating the skills and knowledge to participate in (civil) society and to become a political subject.

Especially in the beginning of my research I was struck how much the school as space appeared to be appropriated by the students. At all times during a typical school day, smaller and larger groups of pupils lingered on the school grounds outside the buildings whereas the teachers were hardly around, quickly retreating to their office if they were not in the classroom. As the location for playing out youth culture by flirting, (mock) fighting, smoking and taking drugs (by a minority), school was not only a place for youth, but of youth (Streissler 2001, 2003).

Teacher-student relations in *preparatoria*

As Levinson has shown (2001), the official curriculum in Mexican *secondary* schools which students attend prior to *preparatoria* is based mainly on learning facts by heart, the hidden curriculum is based on discipline and the equality as citizens, despite class and ethnic differences,. Furthermore, the allegiance to the Mexican nation is stressed by weekly flag raising ceremonies, recitals of poems and singing of songs praising the national heroes and the positive qualities of the motherland. The celebration of national holidays also feature prominently in the school calendar of secondary schools.

As *preparatorias* are part and parcel of the university system rather than the nationwide public education system, references to national symbols were minimised, a fact that some students regretted. Teachers did not understand themselves as transmitters of an ideology proposed by the Mexican compulsory education system based on equality, a positive identification with the Mexican state and active citizenship,

although they might privately endorse these values and few addressed regional or national politics head-on.

The ideology informing teacher-student interactions was different than in secondary school, too. Instead of teachers treating pupils as irresponsible adolescents who had to be protected structurally by the school as institution in order to ensure their welfare, as seems to be the case in secondary schools, teachers and students coincided in their ideal vision of student as responsible young adult intent on studying and growing as human being. Teachers acted as if they did not have any juridical responsibility towards students (although I did not find out whether this was true or not) and disciplining students inside our outside lessons was regarded as ineffective, as one teacher told me: “Yo no soy muy partidario de la disciplina rígida porque me parece que no, no logra nada, uno puede lograr que los alumnos sean callados pero eso no garantiza que aprendan.” Most teachers also rejected authoritarian behaviour towards students because of political reasons. The majority I met belonged to a cohort of academics who had sympathised with or had even been heavily involved with oppositional Marxist groups in the past and mostly supported the leftist oppositional party PRD at the time of my fieldwork. (The PRD, the Party of the Democratic Revolution, was formed in the 1990s as a splinter group of the PRI with a more strongly leftist ideology which was popular among the majority of Mexican academics and played an important role in university politics, even in Guadalajara, where the neo-liberal, populist opposition party PAN dominated regional politics.) Authoritarian behaviour was associated with totalitarian regimes, including Mexico’s own past and its most ignominious event, the massacre of students and other civilians by the military in the Plaza de Tlaltelolco in 1968, following the occupation of the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM). Disciplining students was also considered a salient feature of schools in countries with “savage capitalism”, most importantly the U.S., and was rejected due to its close association with competition. Teachers did not want to make students learn to behave in ways propitious for the neo-liberal market economy that had been introduced with NAFTA. Thus, teachers hardly resorted to methods of discipline and punishment, as described for schools in the U.S. (Eckert 1989) or Europe (Willis 1981, Schiffauer et. al. 2004) as well as for Mexican secondary school (Levinson 2001) which help maintain the power difference between teachers and students.

Beside these patterns of interaction grounded in a certain ideology, teachers have much less power of disposal as e.g. their U.S. peers due to structural specificities in the school system. Returning to Eckert’s quote, the “ultimate power” in this type of school did not “reside (...) with the staff, who control the basic resources” (Eckert 1989, 111), partly because they do not have absolute control over the resources:

- Little pre-fabricated teaching material is used. As textbooks are expensive, they are only required in a few subjects. Students occasionally receive photocopies in class but usually, texts are dictated to them. Besides, they often have to work on assignments in groups, acquiring information from the internet or from encyclopaedia or textbooks available in the school library. As to the books in the school library, they are usually bought with the money contributed by students and parents. One teacher also coerced students to donate books if they wanted to improve their mark.
- There is hardly any monitoring of space or of students’ freedom of movement within or beyond the confines of the school. Although *preparatorias* are either surrounded by a fence or a wall or a combination of both, the gate or gates are

usually kept open. The janitor supposedly keeping the students under surveillance was hardly ever on duty in “my” school and if so, only kept an eye on the occasional junky outside the school gate and prevented him from entering the school. (In the first school, the janitor was a little less lax, students hurried to arrive to school on time but were allowed to leave the school premises during recess and free periods.) As I mentioned, teachers do not perceive it their duty to check on students during recess or when they are not attending lessons. Students were also responsible for their classroom and one of them was handed the key in case the cleaning personnel locked up after finishing their duty.

- There is little monitoring of time: There is no school bell (or at least it was not used during my stay) and the time schedule for lessons is vague. Lessons often started late and some teachers finished them early if the students’ had completed a given assignment (something they were allowed to do within certain limits as lessons should take between 50 and 60 minutes) or if teachers needed to get to another job or appointment or just simply, if they were bored of teaching. There was a rule that students loved to comply with: if teachers did not turn up within 15 minutes of the supposed beginning of the lesson, the students were allowed to take recess. Occasionally lessons were also cancelled by the administration but students were rarely informed. This sometimes resulted in school days of six hours during which we only had two or three one-hour lessons. (The teachers who did not turn up for the lessons were not disciplined or punished either, as far as I could make out.)
- Finally, in *preparatoria* sports plays a very inconspicuous role and as far as I have witnessed, there is no sponsorship.

As to Eckert’s argument on the basic denial of autonomy to students, this does not apply in the case of the *preparatorias*, either. Depending on the school, certain restrictions as to the comings and goings of students as well as to students’ behaviour apply: Students were generally not allowed to consume alcohol or take drugs on the school premises. One area in the rear part of “my” school was known to be a meeting place of “alternative” students who smoked marihuana and marihuana plants had grown between the shrubs in this area, testifying to this illicit activity. A teacher once complained in class about a drunk or stoned student he had found sleeping in the cafeteria but teachers usually closed their eyes on this behaviour and no disciplinary measures were taken. There was no ban on smoking. In accord with the general approach of students as autonomous, responsible beings, their autonomy was curbed to a certain extent but was not denied outright. In the two examples which follow, I will explore the relationship of students with teachers respectively the administration in more detail.

Example 1: Attending lessons

My first example focuses on the issue of attending lessons. Although attendance was checked in each lesson, not all students attended all lessons on one day. Rather, they seemed to make up their minds before each lesson whether they felt like attending. Theoretically at least, the possibility to come and go during a school day was a right of the student. Students’ choice of attending a lesson was influenced by the teacher’s behaviour, how much attendance contributed to the final mark (something which all teachers of one subject agreed upon at the beginning of the semester but which was different for different subjects), whether they were interested in the subject, sometimes

whether they had completed the assignments due for that lesson or had managed to copy them from someone else. Most of the time, however, they just did not attend a lesson or lessons because they were hungry or rather wanted to spend the time with their friends on the school premises or outside.

Playing truant was usually an individual act or the act of a small group of friends. In one instance, however, the whole class decided not to attend a lesson as a form of protest against a teacher who in their opinion had demanded too much homework and only one student had been able to complete on time. Students' opinion about a teacher was thus partly expressed in their attendance. If a large number of students regularly refused to attend a teacher's lesson, he or she probably understood the disapproving message.

Students did not just attend only certain lessons each day, there was also a coming and going of students during a lesson. Sometimes students left individually or in the company of friends. Usually a student from another class walked up to the classroom door, which was open at all times, calling a friend to join him or her. This practice was called "*salonear*", literally going from one class-room to another. It was used in order to flirt or to call girl-friends respectively boy-friends out of their class but became especially popular before student elections, when students were thus summoned to support the different candidate slates. Most students asked the teacher to give them permission to leave the room as they already walked towards the door. This was the students' way of acknowledging the teacher's presence and authority in the classroom but the way students asked was formulaic, playful and sometimes even joking. In the majority of cases, teachers did not object to students leaving and students anticipated this positive reaction. Some teachers did not even pause in their lesson, others made short grudging remarks and one or two teachers explicitly told students that they did not like this habit and would not accept it. Teachers were however aware that leaving lessons was a contestation of authority and a display of power on the parts of the students which those opposing the practice countered in order to regain authority, usually by giving them large and difficult assignments: "*los alumnos (...) no asisten a los clases. El maestro venga y se los pone trabajos dificiles.*" Leaving and letting leave was a matter of wielding and yielding power and can be described as an instance of Bourdieu's "symbolic power".

In the course of the semester, students attendance and their habit of "*salonear*" changed. As they got to know the individual teachers better, they learned with whom they were able to skip lessons, enter late or "*salonear*" and with whom they should rather stay put. Towards the end of the semester, my notes show that in some subjects only half the students were present towards the end of a lesson and I myself learned to sometimes play truant or enter classes late.

The only fact which curbed this behaviour was that attendance influenced students' marks. Attendance was checked each lesson, either at the beginning or the end. Most of the time the teachers themselves read out the attendance lists but sometimes they asked one of the students to do it for them, another instance of yielding power. Towards the end of the term, students who had often played truant were increasingly concerned about "fixing attendance". One method I witnessed was tampering with the attendance list which the teacher had left on the desk, changing the sign for absence, usually a minus, into a sign for presence, a plus. More common was that students started bargaining with the teachers, imploring them to reduce their number of absences, for example by offering to make up for missing lessons by presenting work related to the

subject, donating money or books to the library etc. As one teacher (from the other school) highly critical of these practices told me, students also negotiated on a non-academic level, offering teachers useful or desirable objects such as CDs, tape recorders, kitchen appliances, car tyres or services such as washing a car or even sexual services. According to him, most of his colleagues welcomed these “gifts” or even encouraged such practices and students could, to some extent, count on it that these “gifts” brought the desired results. In rare cases, teachers refused to enter into these bargains. In such a case, students could still turn to the school’s headmaster or headmistress or the school secretary, producing a doctor’s certificate that they had been sick for a certain time, just pleading for leniency or possibly resorting to similar forms of bargaining as with the teachers. Clearly, teachers did not have the last say in controlling students’ presence in class (or even in marking students’ academic performance, as I show elsewhere (Streissler 2005)). Both students and teachers were aware that attendance (as well as marks) could be negotiated to some extent. Students did not act entirely submissive towards the teachers, but rather negotiated with the teachers who did not have absolute power either but also depended upon students for some goods and services. As I have shown, negotiation is thus a vital part of the “hidden curriculum” (Streissler 2005). Let me now turn to a rare event which sheds further light on the intricate power relationships in school, namely the occupation.

Example 2: The occupation

Political violence has been an integral part of Mexican university life. In the 1960s and 70s, bands of working class students, *porras*, who were employed by people intent on increasing their power and influence, terrorised students and staff (Lomnitz 1986). Although these groups are no longer prevalent, occupations and political violence in schools and universities still happen occasionally. Nevertheless, I was rather “lucky” to witness an occupation during my fieldwork (which I already discussed in more detail in Streissler 2004). In order to understand the implications of the occupation one has to know that universities are territories where the Mexican police (or military) may not interfere, a measure that dates back to legal consequences in the aftermath of the student massacre of 1968. This is both a security measure to protect students and staff from (politically motivated, violent) interference but also implies that conflicts and violent incidents among university members can only be solved among themselves.

I want to treat the occupation, its history and aftermath as a significant event (Falk Moore, 1994) which sheds light on the intricate power relations in the school and in the university. Falk Moore states that “events involving a number of persons often are the crossroads where many different interests and visions of things intersect” (Falk Moore 1994: 365). I was not present during the occupation, as this happened in the morning shift whereas I attended the afternoon shift but was present at the reunion the night before and discussed the event with the occupants afterwards, watching a videotape in which they had documented their actions.

The 16 occupants had a series of motives for the occupation some of which they explained themselves and others which surfaced in interviews with other students, many of whom challenged and mistrusted the occupants’ version of the event, partly due to different political allegiances. (The majority of the students who were not actively involved in student politics sympathised with the neo-liberal opposition party PAN.) The activist students themselves argued that they had written a letter to the headmistress

in which they had accused her of a) the embezzlement of funds for the construction of the library (partly donated by the parents), b) the illegitimate charge of school fees and c) the illegitimate application of a law of reprobation (called “article 33”). The headmistress had repeatedly denied these deeds and instead called a general meeting with the representatives of each class to clear herself from these accusations once and for all. I tagged along with the representative of “my” class and thus witnessed this reunion personally.

The headmistress had assembled the students in the gloomy auditorium of the half-finished library where she attempted to deflect the students’ demand that their rights be respected by pointing out that they themselves did not fulfil their duties and even accused them that their parents had not donated enough money to the school, payments which were actually supposed to be voluntary. After raising this point, the President of the Parents’ Association who had joined the meeting a few minutes before, seconded her by explaining how he and the headmistress managed the money entrusted to them but stressing that it was far too little for their ambitious plans of expanding the school’s infrastructure. The headmistress did not address the other issues that the students had raised but instead scolded the students for minor offences such as not returning books to the library on time.

In this meeting the headmistress’s attitude was authoritarian and defensive, an impression I shared with many students who were complaining about her behaviour in a hushed voice as they shuffled out of the auditorium. Apparently, many of them were not convinced by her presentation although they did not dare to contradict her openly in the meeting. Thus, the meeting served to strengthen the headmistress’ position, but not for long. In the interview I had with her some weeks after the occupation, she herself stressed that the reunion had been perfectly democratic. According to her, she could prove that the money for the library was used correctly and the application of the law of reprobation was merely a misunderstanding on the students’ part. Therefore, she considered the occupation a personal offence.

For the students involved, the occupation of the school right after this unsatisfactory meeting was an ultimate measure to bring the problems they had identified to the attention of the president of SEMS (the Office for Higher Education) and thus to an administrative level beyond the school. Student activists from various student candidate slates and from both the morning and the afternoon shift gathered that evening at the seat of the opposition party PRD. It was decided that thirteen former or present students from the school and three members of the student federation FEU should occupy the school, a step which they had planned some weeks earlier as an ultimate sign of protest.

Another reason for this extreme act may also have been that the students were protesting against aspects of democratisation that did not suit them, namely that the politically active students were losing privileges in the school and in the university system. By putting pressure on the administration, they were making a point that the university system at large had to reckon with politically active students of the old type (even if the time of the *porras* seemed to have passed for good).

Some of the occupants also had more personal motives for taking such drastic steps. Among the occupants were students who were personally affected by the law of reprobation which the headmistress applied illegitimately. Two pupils whom I interviewed a few days after the incident condemned the occupation outright, accusing

the students of just having been out for risk and fun². Although excitement certainly featured in the occupation, the students took a number of measures (like not admitting girls to take part so as not to be accused of illicit sex and not introducing drugs on the scene) to prevent the situation from losing its political character and from getting out of hand. Another measure of precaution was not to take along weapons.

The sixteen students taking part in the occupation stayed on the school grounds over night, placated the school guard, organised a sort of disco and a soccer match, and most importantly, erected barricades made of tables, blackboards and chairs in order to prevent students, teachers and the administration from entering the school in the morning. Furthermore, they hung up two banners, saying: "Being young and not being a revolutionary is a contradiction which is almost biological" and "FEU, defending the students' rights. Not one step back!" The students had been well aware of the fact that the time around the beginning of the morning shift, between 6: 30 and 8 a.m. would be the most critical. In the worst case, the large number of students who were supposed to attend school in the morning might possibly have tried to run over the barricades and enter the school grounds and then the situation would most probably have turned violent³. To prevent this from happening, the occupants distributed a written petition to their fellows outside the two school gates and later in the morning organised a press conference in which the petition also featured prominently.

In this petition the students formulated their concerns much more strongly than in the slogans on the transparencies. They listed a number of demands to which they wanted to draw attention, arguing that some of their basic rights, in one case even laid down in the Mexican Constitution, namely free public education, were jeopardised. What struck me was their pervasive use of concepts like the constitution, notions such as liberty, tolerance, respect etc. Their written petition thus drew very much on normative ideas of democracy.

The text ended in a joint demand:

"No to authoritarianism in *Prepa [number]*! In defence of public education we close the school today in order that it will always remain open."

Here the activist students made a link which they argued to be inevitable: in order to guarantee free public education they had to protest against the problems in the school. They did this by "closing the school" that day, a euphemism for the potentially violent act of the occupation. The core of their argument was that students had to defend their rights, if necessary with acts of violence. The petition was signed by "Students of Preparatory School [number]" and the Federation of University Students, signalling that the occupants of the school were backed by the powerful university-wide Student Federation.

To the surprise of the occupants, both the president of the Student Federation FEU as well as the president of the Office of Higher Education SEMS, attended the press conference which they had organised. Whereas the president of SEMS condemned the students' action and even accused them of blackmail, the president of the Student Federation asserted that such means of protest as the occupation would continue. He not only defended the activist students of preparatory school B but also hinted that the FEU

² In his work on young Pakistani and political violence, Oscar Verkaiik points out that fun and violence can actually go hand in hand (Verkaiik 2003).

³ Even without formal weapons, parts of chairs and tables which were dumped in one corner of the school grounds as well as sticks and other debris could have been used as weapons.

would not refrain from occupations of other preparatory schools of the university as ultimate means of political pressure.

From the activist students' description of the occupation, I got the impression that they had chosen violence in the name of democracy in order to bypass the official power structure in the university. The good social connections had apparently protected the headmistress until the occupation, so the students' prior complaints to SEMS had been of no avail. She was suspended for three days while the president of FEU and members of the university administration negotiated with each other. There were few tangible results as the headmistress returned after three days except that suddenly the construction of the library proceeded much faster than before. The occupation was nevertheless a proof how far students could go in contesting authority and displaying power.

The official Student Council in the school countered the occupation with an open letter the following day in which they acknowledged the problems within the school but pointed out that they had to be solved without involving potential violence. They also accused the activist students of mixing up personal problems with political ones, probably referring to the fact that some of the students were themselves affected by the law on reprobation. The Student Council also condemned the fact that students from outside the preparatory school had been involved in the incident, namely former students and members of the Student Federation. According to them, the school was not supposed to be a battle-ground for other persons' interests and should not lend itself to manipulation. In one main point they however agreed with the more extremist students: students had to defend their rights.

Most pupils whom I later interviewed were able to name some of the reasons for the occupation but few knew who had done it. They were divided whether violence was a legitimate means of defending students' rights. Humberto⁴, a student who was later elected to a political office in the school pointed out that a number of other issues were at stake which the other students had not mentioned:

Look, the major reason for occupying the school was because of article 33 [the law on reprobation].... It has to do with the two groups in the school which have a position, it was a fight between them. One acted badly, that was the administration, because it was not allowed to apply this article before 2001, but that was just a pretext for what came next, what was already planned beforehand [by the students]. The main thing is that the *Oficial Mayor* [the third highest official in the school administration] is against the administration, ... what he said was that his intention was to become headmaster and now throw out this group, and from there onwards, there were many violent incidents in the school⁵. Things are turbulent. The highest authorities of the school have surrendered to the president of the Federation of Students, the headmistress, in front of the [president of SEMS] has handed over the school to the Federation of Students and as the Federation of Students has problems amongst itself, this in turn has repercussions here. The Federation is also divided into groups and because of that mainly there were problems here, you see?... This was only a pretext that stems from long

⁴ The name of the student is changed.

⁵ Although it is highly likely that the *Oficial Mayor* was another figure acting behind the scene of the occupation, no other person told me that he was involved.

ago,...This school is being abused by higher levels, they are abusing it for the votes and for the interest of each group.

This student stressed the variety of personalistic relations which criss-crossed the university system, involving students, teachers and administration. What becomes clear from his account are the multifaceted effects of change which the university and organisations like the Student Federation were experiencing: fights over power on various levels, connected with the fact that elections were coming up in the Student Association (comprising the FEU as well as smaller student unions), that the rector had to be elected and a change of the administration of the school was imminent. According to Humberto, the occupation was rather a result of conflicts on higher institutional levels than a protest of students against the administration or at least lent itself to the articulation of diverging interests rather than just being a reaction to mismanagement within the school.

The occupation was a manifestation of students' political culture. The incidents leading up to the occupation revealed the various intertwining sets of political ideas which the students articulated in discourses and actions. The incident also revealed the tacitly assumed balance of students' duties and students' rights in school as perceived by the administration, and concomitantly, the administration's rights and duties as perceived by the students. Especially for the students it must however be stressed that they may not be viewed as a homogeneous body of actors within the school system. Rather, the occupation revealed the different attitudes towards issues that some groups of students had identified as problems. The most extreme attitude of a minority of students was their willingness to resort to violence if their rights or interests were not respected. Other students who also insisted on their rights refused to go that far.

On one level, the occupation was a reaction to problems within the school, measures of the headmistress and other high-ranking members of the administration that many students perceived as mismanagement. On another level, as Humberto was keen to point out, the occupation was used by institutional groups above the school level for their own purposes, mainly by the university-wide Student Federation. In the press conference it became obvious that the occupation was not just a measure of a number of activist students who were concerned about the happenings in their school. Rather, both officials of SEMS and the FEU used the occupation to ascertain their own power in public and in relation to each other. An analysis that would focus only on the school and the relationship between administration and students but leaving out the power fights in the university system at large (including the student unions) would be incomplete. It would ignore how the various actors within one school were related in complex ways to persons in the larger institutional system.

Displaying power, contesting authority

In both examples it became evident that the power relations between students and teachers and between the students and the administration were not absolutely fixed, in the sense of the students being the weak party and the others powerful. Rather, students had some leeway in negotiating their individual interests as well as their interests as a group and teachers sometimes yielded power on their own accord in order to reduce responsibility and limit unwelcome tasks (like taking attendance). Students and teachers were engaged in a tug of war, in yielding and wielding power (Villarreal 1994) which was at times more salient than at others. This formed a vital part of the

“hidden curriculum” (Streissler 2005) and are best described by the notion of power used by Foucault, namely that power is ubiquitous, is produced and reproduced through constant social interaction, can be negotiated and contested and is vital for the functioning of Mexican society at large. From the second case we also learn that a study of the relationship between students and teachers or the administration should not be limited to the confined of an individual school but must occasionally take into account power relationships in a wider context, both institutional as well as regional. In the case of *preparatorias* in Guadalajara, the local university structure, the teachers’ unions, the student federation and political parties, are significant contexts in which students, teachers and the administration act.

References:

- Eckert Penelope (1989), *Jocks and Burnouts. Social Categories and Identity in the High School*, New York & London: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Falk Moore Sally (1994), “The ethnography of the present and the Analysis of Process.” in: Borofsky, Robert. *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill: 362-374.
- Gellner Ernest (1983), *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Hobsbawm Eric (1990), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson Bradley (2001), *We are all equal, Student culture and identity at a Mexican Secondary School, 1988-1998*, Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Levinson Bradley and Dorothy Holland (eds.) (1996), *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person*. Albany: University of New York Press.
- Lomnitz Larissa (1986) “The Uses of Fear: “Porro” Gangs in Mexico” in: Lecron Foster, Mary, Robert A. Rubinstein. *Peace and War, Cross-cultural perspectives*. New Brunswick, Oxford: Transaction Books: 15-24.
- Schiffauer Werner, Gerd Baumann, Riva Kastoryano, Steven Vertovec (eds.) (2004), *Civil Enculturation. Nation-State, School and Ethnic Difference in The Netherlands, Britain, Germany and France*, Oxford & New York: Berghahn.
- Streissler Anna Isabella (2001), “School as place of youth: a preparatory school in Guadalajara, Mexico”, paper held at the Conference “Children In Their Places”, Brunel University, West London, June 21st –23rd 2001.
- Streissler Anna Isabella (2003), *Being young-becoming citizens. Everyday life and political culture in two preparatory schools in Guadalajara, Mexico*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Vienna.
- Streissler Anna Isabella (2004), “Násilí jako cesta k demokracii? Okupace mexické přípravné školy-příklad politické kultury studentu” in Petr Skálik (ed.), *Politická Kultura: antropologie, sociologie, politologie*, Prag: Set Out, p. 259-271. (Czech translation of: «Violence as means towards democratic ends? The occupation of a Mexican preparatory school — an example of students’ political culture», paper held at the 7th EASA conference, 14.8. - 17.8. 2002).

- Streissler Anna Isabella (2005), „Nicht für die Schule sondern für das Leben lernen wir- das Hidden Curriculum mexikanischer Preparatorias in Guadalajara“ in: *Tsantsa, die Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft*, Schwerpunkt Ethnologie und ‚multikulturelle‘ Schule, 10/2005, 49-57.
- Verkaaik, Oskar (2003), “Fun and violence. Ethnocide and the effervescence of collective aggression” in: *Social Anthropology* 11: 3-22.
- Villarreal Magdalena (1994), *Wielding and Yielding. Power, Subordination and Gender Identity in the Context of a Mexican Development Project*, Dissertation, Den Hague: Landbouwniversitete te Wageningen.
- Willis Paul (1981/1977), *Learning to Labour*. New York